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Film Quarterly, Vol. 27, No. 2. (Winter, 1973-1974), pp. 25-28.

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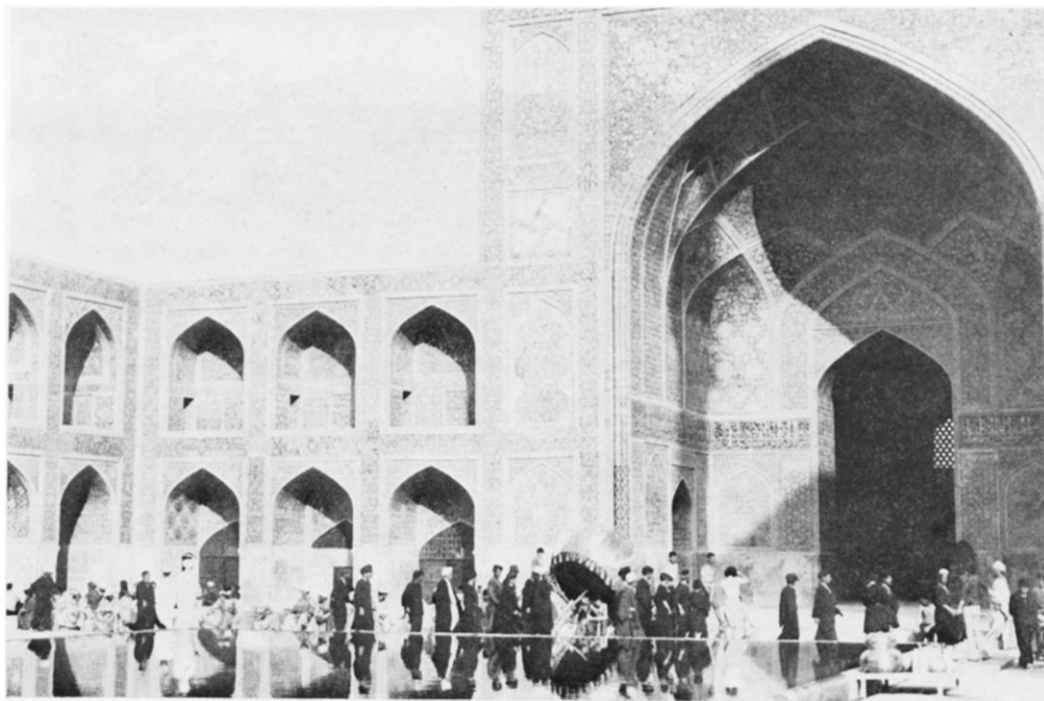
Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

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GIDEON BACHMANN

Pasolini in Persia: The Shooting of *1001 Nights*

"My ambition in making films is to make them political in the sense of being profoundly 'real' in intent: in choosing the characters, in that which they say and in that which they do. That is why I refuse the political fiction film. One of the least appetizing things of the past few years are precisely those fashionable political films, these fictional political films, which are the films of half truths, of reality-unreality, of consolation and of falseness. They are made to pacify the consciousness. Instead of arousing polemics they suffocate it. . . . I avoid fiction in my films. I do nothing to console, nothing to embellish reality, nothing to sell the goods."

Pasolini started travelling because he hates Catholic holidays in Rome. Christmas in the Libyan

desert, Easter trips to North Africa and Saudi Arabia. Finally he began to shoot abroad: *Oedipus Rex* in Morocco, *Medea* in Turkey, and *Canterbury Tales* where Chaucer had placed it. He may not be escaping Catholicism, but he is escaping its geographical orbit: for his latest film, *1001 Nights*, he went to Ethiopia, Eritrea, Yemen and Persia, and before finishing it, will have shot in India and Nepal.

The feeling of a man escaping from his roots is borne out by the first impressions on the set: behind his camera, which he operates himself, he seems a man in a hurry, fraught by restrictions of time and space. He works fast, with great precision, and sure of himself. If a set-up is too complicated, he will choose another; if a crew member is clumsy, he will patiently re-

place him, doing the job, more often than not, himself. Where other directors will manage 10 important shots a day, Pasolini will manage 40. Because the shots seem to be there, ready, in his head, and putting them on celluloid is just a necessary, technical obstacle between his imagination and the viewer. He seems to want to get it over with, free himself of his mind's image, of his obsession; spew it out as fast as possible. Two cameras are constantly ready: simple 35mm Arriflexes without sound and without blimps, one loading while he shoots with the other. Sound is too cumbersome and time-consuming; he will create it later, in the studio, with the help of a few fragments recorded on location. The director of photography only measures the light, the camera operator hands Pasolini the lenses. The shots are set up by the director himself, decor details are decided or adjusted by him directly, the actors placed, with minimal instructions, in the scene at the last moment, eye at the camera's viewer. One feels strongly that if he could make the film entirely alone, Pasolini would do it. The technique he uses, in fact, is cinematically simplistic. There is nothing fancy except the costumes and the landscape; the first cost him, on this film alone, 500 million Italian lire, more than a third of the film's cost, while the latter has been there for centuries, except that nobody ever thought of using it in a film.

In the incredible courtyard of the Mesjed-esh-Shah in Isfahan I watch him moving the masses of locally recruited extras about: incredible faces, all colors from brown to black, turbaned and betogaed, clothed in silk and brocade. The mosque, built in 1706 by the last of the Safavids, cost less than the film now made in it. And it is one of the most famous and fantastic of the buildings of Islam. It is a wedding scene Pasolini has set here: a tired donkey bedecked with precious cloth, a few dancers in the middle of a princely repast taken on the floor, a staid-looking couple. The bride is, in reality, the precocious 13-year-old son of the owner of a nearby hotel, the one where Pasolini is staying. He speaks, miraculously, Italian (although, like

all other actors in the film, he(she) speaks no lines during the shooting). From close by, it's all brass foil and lumber, steel tubular scaffolding and unsewn cloth, but through the camera's eye it's the splendor of the court of Haroun el Rashid. Pasolini has done his research well: the sense of authenticity is there, despite the fable and the fantasy. The immense mosque is real, the reflecting surface of the central pool is real, and the faces are real. And the time element, the rhythm of the speech, the only item that could trip him up, is masterly believable.

Obviously, Pasolini is creating a film style which we find hard to call realistic, but which in effect represents a historical variant of realism. That is why he seeks locations that are not studio-built and faces that seem to be of the period he treats. The exterior aspect becomes more important than the content the actor or decor is meant to carry, and thus they become, in themselves, content. He prefers to have nothing that pretends to be something it is not, and that appears to be one of the reasons he has lost his faith in obtaining political effects through the cinema: the political film, he claims, is like a ball incestuously thrown back and forth between creator and audience, each playing conviction.

In conversation, he readily voices disappointment with those of his critics who seem to have failed to understand his new approach, and who seem to lament his "lost decisiveness." He feels somewhat betrayed by his friends of the left, who do not recognize the kind of "physiognomy-realism" he has attempted to create in his last three films, which he calls his "trilogy of life"—*Decameron*, *Canterbury Tales* and *1001 Nights*. More than the direct social action he tried creating in his early work, he feels these will penetrate to a much wider audience and make, finally, a more incisive inroad on the mind. A calculation which, in terms of the sheer number of viewers, seems proven by fact.

What he seems to wish, is to let the things themselves speak, without imposing his intelligence upon them. Choosing actors, for example, whose physical presence in itself creates an

*Pasolini
at the
camera.*



“imposition of realism.” And as he says in response to my question concerning his preoccupation with themes of the past—an apparent contradiction—he wishes to put the present in a dimension of doubt, and the past is the only force that can usurp the present.

His consistency becomes clear as one watches him work. He refuses, in fact, to impose invented meanings upon the things in front of his camera: once these have been created before being photographed (and thus autonomously of interpretation) they remain flat, pregnant only of the content the costume designer and set decorator have intended. The camera does not participate, as in the classic cinema, in the process of creating meaning. It is, frankly, the same method used by Chaplin.

Most of the time, his two cameras remain at shoulder-height, and do not move; but occasionally he impatiently removes one of them from the tripod and follows an action into hand-held detail, his whole small body taut like a dancer. Up there in the dusty high plateau north of Isfahan, in a medieval village still inhabited by stone-age Persians, where not even the weekly truck to Tehran stops, he has rolled out his generators, has set up his lights and tripods, and has found the single tree that grows in this mud-

brick village—a pomegranate under which a thirteen-year-old boy is meant to be sexually aroused by a bevy of faded beauties imported for the purpose from Tehran. The poor nude boy manages to be aroused each time the cameras stop.

It is not easy, finally, to make the mental bridge between the content of his films and his purpose in making them. One appreciates the attempt, accepts the theory behind it, but awaits results that go beyond “physiognomy-realism.” In the end, despite his disavowal, he is again creating a film form that must be appreciated through the mind.



Evidently Pasolini is searching a new way to express his concerns. The period of disappointment in direct political action is not over, and talking to him one receives an impression of pessimism. Seeking, and not having found—that seems to be his state of the moment, and that would explain why he seems so constantly dissatisfied, so constantly in a hurry. One feels that he recognizes the fact that his work is valid only in the moment of creation, and since the cinema is a dreary, meticulous process, he seems to fear that individual works will take longer to complete than a change of ideology—that his technique may not be fast enough for his developing, galloping ideas. Up here in the Persian desert one feels very clearly that he is traversing his own desert, his own forty years of preparation for another, clearer social view. Perhaps once found, such a view can restore to his works the coherence they once expressed.

The day after I spoke with him, Pasolini, his

actors, his cameras, and his crew were all evicted by military emissaries from the courtyard of the mosque. The Mullahs had phoned Tehran and complained—it seems that donkeys were not supposed to enter the holy area, nor was dancing to be allowed within earshot of the Muezzin. The setback gave everyone time to breathe, but for Pasolini it was disastrous; impatiently he consumed his daily green salad with goats' cheese in the plastic, modern hotel coffeeshop, while the production manager flew to Tehran to try and fix things with state visits and baksheesh. Needless to say, shooting soon resumed, somewhat subdued, somewhat lower in key, closer to the human beings, closer to the dust and the slow speed of the country. The splendor of the mosques and the grand design gave way to a personal concern. Perhaps, in a small way, a road was pointed. A road to a small answer to a large search.

JOHN HESS

Auteurism and After

A REPLY TO GRAHAM PETRIE

Geist: Is there any recourse for a director? Schaffner: What you do is fight to get as many cuts as possible, believing that, with the material and with the people with whom you are working, you are going to arrive, in the end, with your cut. Once you hit a certain level—generally it's true—your cut is the one that's shown.¹

La politique des auteurs states no more than that there are neither good nor bad films but only good or bad cinéastes.²

FRANCOIS TRUFFAUT

Frustrated by the absurdity of latter-day auteurism and dismayed by the low level of most

American film criticism, Graham Petrie has launched an attack on what he calls the *auteur* theory. (Although he uses Sarris's term, Petrie does not directly attack the author of *The American Cinema*.) Practitioners of the *auteur* theory, according to Petrie, "by-pass the issue of who, ultimately, has control over a film"; they rely on intuition alone when they claim that a given film bears the imprint of its director; they ignore the realities of film-making in Hollywood (especially in the period from 1927 to the middle forties); they wrongly insist that "the director's contribution is automatically of major significance"; they discuss marginal films which would be better left to sink into oblivion; and,